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Learning From and With Each Other: Outdoor Leaders' Views on Personal Growth and Well-Being Through Expeditions With At-Risk Populations

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These findings are part of the 3.5-year international research and knowledge transfer project From Outdoors to Labour Market (FOLM). The project adapts across Europe an expedition-based model for personal and social development to remedy youth unemployment.

Literature Review

The literature widely agrees that wilderness expeditions are an effective and appropriate way to facilitate transformational personal and social development (Allison & Von Wald, 2010; Bowen & Neill, 2013; Hinds, 2011; Hoag et al., 2013; Lloyd, 2018). This includes transferrable “key competencies” relevant for employability and for leading a generally content and “successful” life (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005).

The expeditions investigated included 5- to 8-day wilderness journeys on foot or by canoe through remote areas of Europe. Participants were primarily persons with complex life issues and socioeconomic-deprived backgrounds.

Method

The outdoor leaders who facilitate the expeditions were interviewed at the beginning (i.e., pre) and they will be interviewed again at the end (i.e., post) of the FOLM project. This paper presents a subset of findings from the pre-project implementation interviews, in particular from questions relating to the personal growth and well-being of expedition participants and outdoor leaders.

Interviews took place between November 2018 and March 2019 in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Poland, and Spain. They were all conducted by the same interviewer, and interpreters were used when needed. Data analysis followed standard qualitative content analysis procedures.

For the FOLM project, teams of outdoor leaders were recruited in Ireland, Poland, and Spain. The sample of this study consists of 25 outdoor leaders. Of these, 15 were hired for the FOLM project (nine in Ireland, three in Poland, three in Spain), and 10 have worked with the model in the United Kingdom (i.e., $N = 25$). The latter are a convenience sample from the staff pool of Venture Trust, one of the project partners.

Results

When asked what the outdoor leaders saw as the main gain that participants took away from the expeditions, most interviewees highlighted (a) the experience of being seen and treated as someone of worth—affording them, where needed, an external “permission” or validation to a positive self-concept; (b) a sense of success and achievement gained from completing the course; and (c) a set of practical skills and mental tools to exercise more choice (Glasser, 1998) and agency (and/or locus of control/self-efficacy; Bandura, 1977) in their daily and future lives. Several responses also related to experiences and habits contributing to a healthy lifestyle, such as daily physical exercise, being outdoors in nature, and even simple aspects such as practicing a daily routine and having regular (shared, self-prepared) meals.

The factors considered prime indicators for program success (i.e., the most reliable predictors for long-term personal and social growth toward leading a content and “successful” life) were evidence of increased positive self-concept and a growing sense and behavioral expression of agency.

Listing key factors that nurture socioemotional growth in expedition participants, interviewees repeatedly stated immersion in nature; the social cohesion formed over the expedition among the journey companions; and the expedition leaders, specifically their willingness to listen, and a stance of respect and appreciation for each individual.

In terms of the *process* to achieve a more positive self-concept and a higher sense of self-efficacy, nearly all interviewees emphasized factors contributing to a socioemotionally “safe space” (Hildmann & Hardie, 2019) for sharing and growth. Interviewees mentioned a range of strategies and tools to create and maintain such a safe space.

When asked what insights they had gained from the expeditions and from working with disadvantaged populations, several outdoor leaders stated they felt enriched from making a valuable contribution to someone’s life and growth progress and felt

humbled and equally inspired by the resilience and grit (Davidson, 2016; Duckworth, 2017) often found in the participants. They argued that this experience helped them keep a positive view and mindset of appreciation for their own life circumstances—which arguably is conducive to well-being.

Discussion

That positive self-concept and a sense of agency are seen as key indicators for program success is in line with prevailing literature (Myers et al., 2014) and justifies the plethora of research in outdoor adventure education on self-concept and locus of control. It also suggests that multiday expeditions—in combination with pedagogical tools and strategies, such as a strength-based approach (Passarelli et al., 2010), narrative approach (Cassidi, 2001), and choice theory (Glasser, 1998)—present a particularly suitable setting for these learning objectives.

Attentive, open, and respectful leaders have been shown to be conducive to learning (Hattie, 2009). This relates to the concept of *individualized consideration* in *transformational leadership* (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Hayashi & Ewert, 2006), which has nurturing of personal growth and well-being at its core.

The call for creating and maintaining a “safe space” as a prerequisite for sharing and growth supports the advance of *positive psychology* in outdoor adventure education (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2005). It also supports a critical discussion around the use of challenges and distress in outdoor education (Davis-Berman & Berman, 2002; Leberman & Martin, 2003).

There seems to be a connection between what outdoor leaders see as crucial for the participants’ well-being and their own personal and professional investment during the expeditions. This supports the findings of Clark (2018) on factors that help wilderness therapy field guides maintain a healthy emotional balance that leads to career longevity.

In summary, the findings suggest that both expedition participants and outdoor leaders learn and grow through each other in terms of personal competence and well-being. The crucial factors for both groups seem to be a sense of purpose and a feeling of being valued, which from the perspectives of both narrative theory and social psychology merge into a positive concept of self, which is conducive to health and well-being. The difference appears to be that participants gain this from micro situations during the expedition, whereas facilitators extract it from an overarching sum of experiences of working in this field and may find the micro situations more draining than energy-restoring.

By implementing specific tools and strategies, outdoor programs could use these insights to increase the personal gain of expedition participants elsewhere. Future research could investigate the operational mechanics and more detailed effects of *safe space*, as well as the dialogic nurturing of well-being between program participants and facilitators.

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